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ABSTRACT

Student attitudes about using audio cassettes in the course "Images of Man" at Deakin University, Australia, were evaluated in 1979. A total of 192 off-campus and 39 on-campus students responded to a mail questionnaire. Responses indicate the following: students stopped cassettes to take a break and to replay sections; 70 percent listened to cassettes while doing a routine chore, and about 75 percent usually listened when they were free of interruptions; students did not always use the programs at the appropriate time and delayed their listening; some students desired program transcripts; women were much more likely to listen to cassettes when free of interruptions and when doing chores, and to feel that the voice on cassettes helped to overcome the isolation felt by being off-campus students; distance from campus did not seem to interact with the cassettes' role in lessening feelings of isolation or in keeping students working on the course; off-campus students seemed to enjoy cassettes more than did on-campus students, were more concerned to build them into their study programs, and were more accepting of the shortcomings of programs in content but more critical of production and technical shortcomings; the main dissatisfaction of on-campus students was not being provided with their own copies of audio cassettes as were off-campus students. It is concluded that a high proportion of students used and highly valued audio cassettes supplied as part of their teaching materials, and that more guidance should be given to students to improve their skills in using tapes effectively. Some student comments are included. (SW)

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Listening and Learning: Audio Cassettes at Deakin University

J. E. Gough Deakin University

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade or so there have been many changes in the teaching of distance students at tertiary level in Australia. Nevertheless, it is still true that until recently this mode of instruction was limited to a relatively few institutions and used teaching materials consisting largely of printed notes and references without much apparent evidence of either curriculum or graphic design. This is changing rapidly. Five universities have very substantial distance education systems as well as some thirty or so colleges of advanced education. Institutions preparing courses for students at a distance are taking advantage not only of instructional design techniques but are also taking more care to achieve a pleasing and professional presentation of these materials. In addition, there is an increasing use of audio cassettes and of video programs. At Deakin University, in addition to some 160 volumes of printed material, we have over 200 audio cassettes programs and some 80 video programs. Each year the University distributes some 20,000 audio cassettes involving both substantial development and distribution costs. In the light of this expenditure, it is clearly in the interests of the University to examine the use of audio cassettes by students to ensure that they are forming an effective part of the educational program. The data presented in this report are derived from a pilot study carried out at Murdoch and Deakin Universities (McDonald and Gough, 1980) and supported by an ERDC grant.

In that study attention was drawn to the limited amount of research about the use students make of audio cassettes. At the Open University, Gallagher (1978) has studied student use of radio broadcasts. Currently, at that institution there is research into radio vision and audio vision which is relevant to distance educators interested in the use of non print media. In Australian institutions McDonald and Knight (1979) at Murdoch, and Crew (1979) at New England, explored students' attitudes toward audio cassettes and the value of tapes in transmitting information, stimulating students to work, and keeping up student morale. These studies have been somewhat general and have surveyed student opinion across a range of courses. Whilst this has been useful, it is to be expected that there are aspects of the use of tapes which may be highly dependent on the context in which they are used. For this reason the study by McDonald and Gough concentrated on only a few courses and looked for comparisons between tapes which were primarily used for instructional purposes as opposed to those intended largely as enrichment. Additionally, the study intended to investigate whether students on campus used tapes differently from off campus students. However, the latter intention was frustrated by an unsatisfactory response rate from on campus students. The present report is concerned with the responses received from students in Deakin University enrolled in the course Images of Man.

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2. *METHODOLOGY*

Students enrolled in Images of Man in 1979 were surveyed by means of a mailed questionnaire. The response rate was highly satisfactory in the case of off campus students, but inadequate in the case of those enrolled as on campus students.

TABLE 1

Questionnaire Response from On Campus and Off Campus Students Enrolled in Images of Man

	On Campus	Off Campus	Total
Number of students	111	259	370
Number of Returns	39	192	231
Response Rate	35%	74%	62%

The poorer response rate to mailed questionnaires by on campus students at Deakin University is not confined to this study. In a study of student workload by Gough and Monday not yet published, the same phenomenon was observed. In the case of that study the discrepancy was not quite so marked but after the initial letter and two follow up letters the response from on campus students was only 45% compared with 75% from off campus students. Several factors may have contributed to these differences. The questionnaires in both studies were clearly concerned with off campus students and some questions were less appropriate for their on campus counterparts. Gough and Monday found some evidence to suggest that on campus students regarded themselves as 'second class citizens' at Deakin University. This is an ironic reversal of the usual situation in which *off campus* students are usually considered as disadvantaged. In the case of Deakin a major commitment of the University is directed towards off campus students. The materials developed for those students are also used by the on campus student. 'Course delivery' arrangements and teaching strategies have to be modified for the on campus student who appears only to be aware that the off campus student has received 'first consideratation'. A measure of resistance is not surprising from students who feel disadvantaged compared to their off campus counterparts. Comments from on campus students reported later lend support to this view.

3. *RESULTS*

3.1 LENGTH OF PROGRAMS

One of the advantages of audio cassettes over radio broadcasts is that they are under the control of the user. Students can interrupt their listening whether to take a rest, make notes, or replay a difficult section. Because of this ability to listen at will, programs on audio cassettes can be longer than would normally be acceptable. It should be noted, however, that a number of respondents are concerned with the length of the cassettes. The following comments illustrate the point.

> "Some are too long winded with insufficient pertinent information. Watch out for 'wafflers'."

> "Keep the length of some of the tapes down to a reasonable level. Some take too much time".

"Tapes going over 15—20 minutes become boring and time consuming, especially when a lot of talk is irrelevant. The person on the tape should state facts quickly and precisely".

"Many cassettes are far too long. Shorter more to the point cassettes would have greater impact".

Whilst therefore, there is a general tolerance towards length of program, this should not be presumed to suggest that length is of no consequence.

3.2 INTERRUPTING PROGRAMS

Tables 2 and 3 show the extent to which students stop tapes either to take a break or to replay a section.

TABLE 2

Number of times, on average that student stopped each tape to take a break

	N	%
None	77	40
Once	58	30
Twice	42	22
More than twice	15	8
Totals	192	100

TABLE 3

Number of times, on average that students stopped each tape to replay a section

	N	%
Not at all	17	9
1—5 times	137	71
6—10	15	8
More than 10	23	12
Totals	192	100

These figures show that while students are much less likely to stop cassettes merely to take a break, students *do* stop them in order to replay sections at least once and in many cases on several occasions.

3.3 LISTENING HABITS

It was further found that more than 70% of students using audio cassettes listened to them whilst undertaking some routine chore, but as well, three-quarters of the students usually listened to cassettes in situations when they could be relatively free of interruptions. This suggests that students make intelligent use of audio programs initially obtaining an overview whilst engaged in other activities and subsequently studying the cassette in a more suitable study environment. There is some evidence that students do not always use the programs at the appropriate time and instead delay their listening. Deakin university students are provided with cassettes for the duration of the course. They are not required to return them until the course is completed. This means that apart from the intrinsic interest of the programs, there

are no deadlines or other sanctions which encourage students to listen to them at the time lecturers intended they should. The result is that not all students used the cassettes as expected. Indeed, several admitted to not using the audio material at all.

> "I did not make use of them. I have not got a cassette recorder, and I would rather read."
>
> "In filling out this questionnaire I have found the questions are based on the assumption that I, as a student, did use audio cassettes. The fact is I didn't use audio cassettes for the time I was still studying and felt not in the least bit deprived of material. I have answered the questions I was able to."

However, the responses generally show that these students are a minority indeed.

3.4 TRANSCRIPTION

Another issue that emerged was the tendency of a few students to spend considerable amounts of time in transcribing programs. In addition, there were a number of requests or suggestions that the *University* should provide transcripts of programs. It suggests that some proportion of students may be 'print dependent' for their learning. This use of audio programs was never intended by lecturers and is an extremely time consuming exercise. It is an issue that may repay a more detailed investigation.

3.5 EFFECTS OF PREVIOUS STUDY

It is also of interest to note that students' use of audio cassettes does not depend on their previous study experience. When students were divided into two groups; those that had previous experience in post secondary study and those that had not, the differences between the two groups in their use of audio cassettes were minimal. For example, about three quarters of the students listened to tapes when they could isolate themselves from interruptions and concentrate solely on the material. For the inexperienced students the percentage was 75% while for the experienced students it was 72%. Similarly, with respect to taking notes, 59% of experienced students took notes from audio cassettes, whilst 60% of inexperienced students did so. Perhaps this finding is only to be expected as students with previous study experience in the more traditional courses may have had little or no experience in the use of audio cassettes.

3.6 DIFFERENCES IN USE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

There are some interesting differences between the use of cassettes by men and women. Table 4 shows the percentage response to three items in which differences are large. The differences show that women are much more likely to:

- listen to cassettes when they can be free of interruptions
- listen to cassettes when doing routine chores
- feel that the voice on cassettes helps to overcome the isolation felt by off campus students

TABLE 4

Percentage of Men and Women (Deakin University) who . . .

	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
a. . . 'almost always' or 'usually' listened to cassettes when they could isolate themselves from interruptions and concentrate solely on the materials	49	61	88	79
b. . . 'almost always' or 'usually' listened to cassettes whilst undertaking a routine chore	6	8	26	23
c. . agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'The sound of a voice helps to counteract the isolation felt by me as an external student'	38	48	83	74

These differences may be regarded as reflecting the different domestic situation of many women students who are still occupied in the home. Being by themselves or with their children allows them to listen to tapes whilst undertaking routine chores without disturbing others. At the same time the frequent presence of children in the home during the day and of husbands in evenings makes it necessary for the women students to find a quiet place free of interruptions in order to study. For the man this consideration is less important as Australian family patterns seem to accept the husband occupying himself with study and doing less around the home. Similarly, the husband is at work during the day and probably enjoys more outside social contact than the wife and mother and is, therefore, less subject to feelings of isolation.

3.7 GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Geographic isolation is a variable of interest but an examination of Table 5 shows that distance does not seem to have a substantial influence on the way in which students use audio cassettes. The geographic distribution of students is shown below

15% of respondents indicated they lived within 30 kilometres of Deakin
34% between 31 and 100 kilometres
25% between 101 and 200 kilometres and
26% over 200 kilometres

TABLE 5

Distance from the University related to Isolation and the value of cassettes in stimulating students to work as seen by respondents who agree or strongly agree

	Isolation		Stimulation to work on the course	
	N	%	N	%
Students living within 30 kms	22	70	11	35
Students living more than 100 kms away	70	66	40	38

Distance from the campus seems to have no influence on the role of cassettes in assuaging feelings of isolation or in keeping students working on the course. However, geographically remote students are more likely to use notes they take from audio cassettes in preparing for an assignment. Of students living within 30 kms of the University 43% take notes from audio cassettes for this purpose while of students living more than 100 kms away, 61% do so. With this exception, then, it would seem that the isolation felt by mature age students studying at a distance, is a function of their mode of study rather than of their geographical location. The off campus student who lives near the campus behaves very much like his counterpart who lives some distance away. This is not to say that audio cassettes are not important for remote students but simply to say they are *equally* important for *all* off campus students regardless of distance from the university.

4. SUGGESTIONS TO OTHER STUDENT USERS OF CASSETTES

As might be expected when respondents are asked to express an opinion, their answers range across a wide spectrum including views that are directly contradictory.

4.1 ON CAMPUS RESPONDENTS ADVICE

On campus respondents gave the following selection of answers to the question 'What advice would you give new students on using audio cassettes?' Some comments suggest that cassettes are not as useful in presenting information as the written materials.

> "Not to spend too much time on cassettes as the written material is far more valuable especially if you are fighting for time".
>
> "Be prepared to ignore a lot of information given, occasionally it will confuse you, although more frequently it will bore you. Some 'guest speakers' fail to explain some important section clearly while others ramble – needing guidance."
>
> "Listen well but don't take them too seriously as a source of information. Leave this to your analysis of the texts."

Others suggest that cassettes are best appreciated if one views them as supplementary rather than primary.

> "Listen to it as a break from heavy work – it tends to stimulate interest rather than teach."
>
> "When you listen to the cassette, listen to it with a casual attitude and try to enjoy the discussion, report or whatever. That way you tend to take in more than if you were to concentrate too hard."

While others do suggest a more serious application to the task of listening:

> "Use them for thought stimulation and involvement. Note down helpful points."
>
> "Treat the tape as helping you broaden your knowledge on the subject, treat it as if you were getting various opinions on your topic, writing notes is fairly difficult with tapes, so just write down what impressed you most about the things discussed in it."

"Isolate yourself so as you can concentrate solely on what is being said; have paper ready to take notes; consider it as an essential part in the course."

4.2 OFF CAMPUS RESPONDENTS ADVICE

Off campus students, in addition to similar comments as above, offered some more specific advice:

"Know something of the topic before listening to the tape."

"Use headphones — it locks the tapes material into your head —and locks out external distractions. Summarise the salient points."

"Try to run through the tapes quickly as soon as they arrive or shortly thereafter,

a. check sound and reproduction
b. have a prehearing
c. look for relevance to topics
d. check length of tape side.

Now use study guide and play tape accordingly, using the instructions from the guide, taking brief notes as the tape is played (i.e. under lecture conditions)."

5. ADVICE TO STAFF PRODUCING AUDIO CASSETTES

5.1 AVAILABILITY OF CASSETTES FOR ON CAMPUS STUDENTS

When it comes to advising staff about the provision of audio programs, on campus students focus most frequently on a single issue, that of being able to borrow cassettes only overnight, or otherwise having to use them in the library. The following comments are representative of the views expressed:

"More flexible borrowing conditions are needed. I can't find time to play all the cassettes at University, and when I do, the necessity of listening to a lot at once and of sitting there staring at the wall makes me lose concentration and interest."

"Try and arrange to have more copies available and to have the library extend the lending period to a week so that the cassette is available with the week's work, for the on campus students."

"As an on campus student, the thing that I find most annoying is that the cassettes are only available on loan during most afternoons and not earlier. They are available only as an overnight loan and have to be returned by 9.30 a.m. or else. This is too restrictive a procedure and is the main reason I rarely listen to tapes. I cannot listen to them on campus because I am too busy and the only time I have available is when I am at home. And as there is a limited loan period, I still find it difficult to find enough time to listen to them. However, if they were available on a two or three day loan, I am sure I will not borrow or return them without listening to them."

5.2 OTHER COMMENTS BY ON CAMPUS STUDENTS

"Staff should attempt to make the sound of the tapes clearer."

"Be more concise. Use speakers who have a good 'presentation'

and a reasonably pacy style. Languid, ponderous voices tend to lull one to sleep. Shape up audio visual so that they keep the gear in operating order."

"To provide more information on the subject. To make the discussions longer."

"i. who the heck thought up that weird music that introduces and says goodbye on each recording?

ii. it might be useful to quietly and quickly announce (in the play recordings) the beginning of each Act . . . and Scene . . .

iii. rather an overlong stretch of silence at the beginning of the tapes

iv. I found (maybe I'm the only one who did) that it was slightly (but positively) disconcerting when I couldn't distinguish which members of the various groups were speaking. Maybe I just want to feel myself a member of the group.'

"The tape should be more like a text book. The group discussions, for example, have no set direction and the listener is likely to get lost. If the tape were broken into short, set-out segments it would be much easier to follow."

"Have more relevant material in them. If there ever are any important parts in the cassettes a lot of time is wasted going back trying to get the information so tapes aren't of much use for giving facts but they may be of more value for general use. Also they should be more planned — it wastes a lot of time when you have to listen to lecturers fighting each other for space on the tape."

5.3 COMMENTS BY OFF CAMPUS STUDENTS

When giving advice to staff on making audio programs, off campus students made a number of suggestions under the following broad headings.

5.3.1 Type of Program

On the type of program, one of the most frequently mentioned issues was the use of discussion type programs. Illustrative of these comments were the following:

"Use course teams more in discussion of relevant material pertaining directly to subject."

"Substitute discussion for readings from plays or novels. For me the readings have added nothing to the enjoyment or understanding of the works whereas the discussions have provided a very interesting aid to working in complete isolation."

"Discussion of particular areas or topics of a given course could be used more. I have found, as an off campus student, that actually listening to a discussion of some aspect of the course has been very helpful. More *discussions type* cassettes would be helpful for those who cannot attend study centres etc."

"I find the tapes very useful particularly the discussion ones. It is definitely a 'contact' with the staff even though it is remote."

"More of them, especially course team discussing the course. I found listening to a course team discussion more thought provoking than reading material."

Not everyone agreed and several students specifically criticised the discussion type tape, however more on production issues than on other grounds.

"To give more background material on a subject and less 'discussion' tapes because the members talking on the tapes seem to go off on tangents and don't often do much to clarify a subject.."

"Discussions between Deakin University staff often go round and round in circles, reach no particular agreement and give little information of importance—except that it is difficult to be dogmatic about anything. Could these discussions be more definite in giving guidance and useful information?"

"If it is to be of a casual or more intimate type of discussion say, as between tutor and student, maybe, then perhaps two people and at the outside three people, would be better than four or more."

"Discussions are useless, avoid the ego tripper, like I, I, I."

Clearly, then, discussion type tapes are popular but would be even more so if the more specific criticisms could be accommodated.
Still on program type, one student suggested a vocabulary tape:

"Would it be possible with each semester to include a tape with the correct pronunciation of unfamiliar (to us) words and names, particularly the names of non English people. One feels uncertain about entering into discussions, whilst being unsure of pronunciations."

One feature frequently commented on was the translation or speaking over the original speaker:

"Not to have cassettes which have a translator speaking at the same time as the person whom he is translating for. It is not usually clear."

"I found cassettes with Simone de Beauvoir's voice superimposed by a translator distracting."

"The tape of the voices of Sarte, etc. overplayed with its translation was not of much use. This technique does not work on tape."

One respondent felt that women's voices did not come over as clearly as males and a number of students felt that the quality of the audio could be improved, particularly when the speaker had a 'foreign accent'.

"The sound in some cassettes could be improved. There seems to be a hollow echo in some even when the speakers are not speaking in a foreign accent."

"People should speak clearly on the tape as names are often hard to understand."

"Sound level should be consistent. Accents are sometimes difficult to understand."

These comments sometimes referred to purchased programs:

"Lack of clarity on imports should be checked and sometimes militate against purchase."

but more often are concerned with Deakin programs:

"Some of Deakin productions have poor balance/mike placements in discussion involving three or four people. Use more mikes."

5.3.2 ADMINISTRATION

The major criticisms concerned tapes being sent out 'not checked';

"Testing tapes before being sent. (Some of mine were blank.)"

"Please check that cassettes when sent out are correctly wound i.e. beginning with side one and at the beginning of side one."

"Always check cassettes before despatching to remote areas. I have received tangled tapes now and again but have been fortunate in obtaining the services of a technician at work to rewind the appropriate points."

Several believe that taped lectures would be useful:

"Could actual lectures be taped."

"A more fomal lecture—as to a class would be useful I think. Perhaps with one or two questions at the end."

While not advocating presenting a taped lecture, one of the respondents was clearly in favour of using tapes to provide more information:

"I tend to believe that taped discussion of the most salient features, of the subject in question, would ease the student's understanding. The Marxist section, for example, has only one cassette on Marxism Today which hardly explains what Marxism is."

supported in some measure by:

"More questions should be raised and then answered by lecturers with perhaps a summary at the end of the main points covered. This would perhaps reinforce what has been said."

5.3.3 PRODUCTION

In addition to the criticisms mentioned previously, a relatively high proportion of respondents commented on the numbering of cassettes being inconsistent with the study guides:

"The tape number as used in the study guide, should be marked clearly on the cassette with the title."

5.3.4 OTHER COMMENTS

Only one student mentioned that there should be advice to the user of cassettes about getting the best out of them and when to return them.

Another respondent felt that it would be useful to have a brief synopsis of each tape in the study guide at the relevant point.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In drawing broad conclusions, it could be said that students value audio cassettes highly and that this valuing of audio material emphasises the worth of producing good programs that are technically easy to listen to. The evidence is slender but there does seem to be some indication that off campus students enjoy cassettes more than on campus students, are more concerned to build them into their study programs and are more accepting of the shortcomings of programs in content but more critical of production and technical shortcomings. Problems, such as inconsistent numbering and failure to number programs, are an obvious irritant. Clearly, some consideration should be given to the main dissatisfaction of on campus students, that of not being provided with their own copies of audio cassettes as are off campus students.
The more specific conclusions that can be drawn support the beliefs about the value of audio cassettes generated from informal feedback from students. These are:

A high proportion of students use and value highly audio cassettes supplied as part of their teaching materials.

Whether or not a tape is regarded as essential instruction of only enrichment by the teaching staff, the majority of students will make similar use of it and ascribe similar importance to it.

As well as conveying information, tapes are seen as valuable in helping students to feel part of the institution and in helping to keep them studying.

Whilst there are differences in the use of tapes by women in contrast with men, these probably reflect situational differences rather than intrinsic differences in learning styles.

More guidance should be given to students to improve their skills in using tapes effectively.

Students have identified a number of deficiencies in audio cassettes as illustrated, which make tapes less effective and which should be taken into account by staff preparing tapes.

As these findings are supported by similar findings at Murdoch and elsewhere it can be presumed thay have a general validity.

In conclusion, there seems little doubt that well planned audio programs that supplement rather than duplicate the printed materials and which are technically competent will be accepted and used by students as a valuable part of their learning materials.

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